

# Santa Cruz Conference on Chicano Culture

by Nina Serrano

On the first sunny days after rain, flood and storms

On a green grassy knoll overlooking the Pacific Ocean

Amid the songs of birds and the barks of sea lions

Approximately seventy-five artists and cultural workers sat indoors to consider the past, present and future of the Chicano art movement and its individual artists.

The conference at UC Santa Cruz was characterized by warmth and frankness. A moment of controversy occurred when art historian Shiva Goldman called for a stop to graphic images of the Chicana as passive (the "helper", the "sexy ornament", etc.). However, by the second day, controversy dissolved as California women artists Judy Baca (Los Angeles), Sue Martinez (San Jose), Patricia Rodriguez (San Francisco) and Carmen Lomas Garza (San Francisco) spoke.

Judy Baca is creating the longest mural in the world on the side of the Los Angeles aqueduct, a twenty-five-minute walk. The multi-cultural mural displays the history of all the peoples who have lived in the immediate area. As the project takes shape over the years, some of the original painters 'graduate' to the designing group and help train new community muralists.

Carmen Lomas Garza works at the Galeria de la Raza in San Francisco, along with Rene Yanez and Ralph Maradiaga, who also participated in the conference. Carmen said home altars were the first art she ever saw and the first she studied. She showed slides of personal altars (in bedrooms) of older Los Angeles women (her grandmother's friends.) These were examples of working class art in the Barrios throughout California.

Sue Martinez, artist, editor and San Jose printer, observed that "Most Chicano art takes place in the home... the gardens, loteria cards, make-up, costumes and felt pen drawings." Sue seeks out Barrio art to publish in *El Tecolote*, a bilingual Bay Area newspaper.

Patricia Rodriguez, "Mujeres Muralistas", (Women Muralists) told how her group created murals in the parking lots of Paco's Tacos (24th Street and South Van Ness) and the Mission Hiring Hall (Mission between 24th and 25th Streets) in San Francisco. There were no women role models to follow, so they had to develop their own female-oriented imagery, and paint it. Patricia went on to create a series which she called "Visual Interviews", of life masks of her former teachers. Among the subjects are the foremost Bay Area Chicano artists including Malaquias Montoya.

Malaquias Montoya also spoke about female imagery. "I knew things were changing when some people started complaining that the female figures on my silkscreen posters looked too much like



Film producer, director and playwright Luis Valdez was among the many participants gathered to discuss Chicano culture. He urged Chicano artists to "make a name for yourself... become visible..."

men." In fact, slides of his prints made clear his respect for human beings at work. Malaquias showed a series he created of Mental Health posters in which the figures are working and using tools symbolizing his vision of a healthy society. One of the state mental health officials who commissioned the work said that these tools in the workers' hands made him think of weapons which implied violence. A student participant in the conference congratulated Malaquias on the slides of his art.

Malaquias spoke about his grandmother who lived in the mountains. She had little money yet her home was always very attractively decorated. She told him of getting pails of colored sands from the mountainside to tint the walls. Blown-out tires she found on the old highway near her home she made into tire print-blocks, creating borders by printing around the edges of the wall with the tire block dipped into the earthen tints.

His brother, Jose Montoya, graphic artist and poet, spoke of the Chicano artist-organizer (a term applicable to many of the participants) organized Chicanos into the universities and kept them there. Only the artist returned to the Barrios. "The other professionals had to go on to other places to pay back their student loans," Jose quipped, adding that the prisons also send their graduates back to the Barrio.

Nane Alejandrez was such a graduate; "Ex-Vato Loco," he called himself. He presented a slide show covering many aspects of tattoo art, including clandestinely made prison tattoo machines, created from contraband materials. Prison tattoos, which often take from six months to a year to complete, are done under difficult conditions: the artist may be moved to another prison, the tattoo apparatus may be confiscated; ensuing punishment. "Tattoo artists deserve credit," said Nane as he documented their art, which he says has been with humanity

since 1800 BC in Egypt.

Thomas Ybarra, moderator for the sessions, kicked off the discussion on "Artistic form in the Barrio" by saying "We are a working-class people." He recalled the different kinds of sunbonnets for field work made by women in his native Texas. The nuances of bonnet styles pinpointed where the wearer was from, and who she was. "Chicano artists," Tomas said, "use images to show themselves as working-class people," not as quaint stereotypes.

Ralph Maradiaga presented slides of exhibitions and posters from San Francisco's Galeria de la Raza, covering its twelve-year history. Ralph and Rene had to teach themselves to be curators. For each of their shows, they re-paint the gallery walls to a color or colors appropriate to each exhibit. This is a radical departure from the traditional white walls used at most art galleries.

The Galeria de la Raza makes itself highly visible to its community utilizing a giant billboard on its Bryant Street exterior wall, and its front 24th Street windows to announce and publicize exhibits. Ralph noted that young people in the Barrio have shown most interest in gallery viewings when they could easily identify with the subject. Dia de Los Muertos (Day of the Dead) exhibits have become a November custom at the Galeria. Teachers throughout the city take children to visit it.

Among the many talented and productive participants at the conference was theatre and film director and playwright Luis Valdez (Zoot Suit). Luis hosted for the conference participants, an evening of poetry and music at the Teatro Campesino's "Etc. Cafe" in San Juan Bautista, less than an hour's drive through beautiful countryside.

Luis MC'd the evening's entertainment which included Jose Montoya's poetry. "La locura cura" (madness cures), said the poet referring perhaps to the use of humor in his poetry which reflects the

Sacramento Valley rural and Barrio life. "La locura cura" (madness heals).

Alurista from San Diego read from his works and told how "Chicano Park" was established in San Diego, with middle and high school students as the troops who create it. Luzma Espinoza of Sacramento read from her poetry about her youthful experiences arriving in the United States from Mexico. She often incorporated sound effects, chants, and songs in her work.

Ear splitting sounds of a highly original Chicano punk rock band, "Los Illegals", filled the night. The young people say it is excellent music. "Los Illegals" performed behind barbed wire with a shred of a handkerchief, a hat and other reminders of human struggle caught on it. A giant elongated stuffed figure hung suicide-style on stage, throughout their energetic, well-lighted and choreographed concert.

Ed Carrillo, a Santa Cruz artist, organized the three-day event. It is not clear if he was responsible for the weather but the people, the place and the "show and tells" spoke well for the Chicano artists' sense of beauty. Ed described the pain of having his mural erased in his home town. This lament was heard from several artists in response to Picardo Chavez's videotape about murals being painted over.

The theme of "mural removal" echoed Harry Gamboa's remark that "Chicanos are a phantom culture." The Los Angeles thought Chicano art should be more visible and regional. His slides of his own "Performance art" reflected both the entertainment industry and ancient tribal ceremonies of the Los Angeles region and involved actors, costumes and the music of Los Illegals.

In his final remarks on the last day Luis Valdez described a "greased pole effect" among Chicano artists: If one artists makes it 'up the pole', others try to pull that one down. He, too, urged Chicano artists to be more visible. "Make a name for yourself. If Chicano artists were more visible it would improve the situation for everyone."

Tim Drescher, editor of the magazine "Community Murals" accused community college and university administrators of destroying murals. He suggested that mural art's nature being collective and public can be seen as a threat by the establishment. Tim added that women have been a moving force in the mural art movement.

Eva Cockcroft, author of *Towards a People's Art* (1977), noted that having a book go out of print, as hers has, is equivalent to having a mural painted over. It is no longer available to people. It is fortunate that *Towards a People's Art* will be reprinted in Mexico, because it includes all the Asian, Latino, Black and Native American murals in the United States. Some of them are already gone.

In summary, the moderator, Humanist Thomas Ybarra, concluded that "Chicano art and culture in California" conference had a harmonious way of being diverse and yet unified.